



Maura Hurley

Sowing Seeds Early

By RANJITA BISWAS

The mustard seed is a much-favored condiment in Bengali cooking. Added to the smoking mustard oil, it sputters and exudes a pungent, delicious aroma; ground to a paste, it makes Bengal's famous *hilsa* fish curry absolutely delectable. One would think that these associations with Bengal have inspired Maura Hurley, married to a Bengali and who has made Kolkata her home, to name her little home library "Mustard Seeds." But there are other deeper meanings the spice evokes for Hurley. "I believe kids are like seeds. If something is planted in their minds at a young age, like peace and coexistence, it will develop meaningfully into their adult lives," she says.

Hurley got the idea of starting the library at her own flat in the Salt Lake housing complex she lives in when she moved from Japan to Kolkata with her bio-physicist husband, Gautam Basu. She wanted to introduce her daughter and son to the world of books in an open and happy ambience but failed to find a nearby library. "In America we are quite used

to this concept of community libraries," says Hurley, who was also exposed to the concept of the "Bunko" or pocket libraries at individual homes during the time she spent in Kyoto, where she taught English. Meanwhile, she had collected books, many of them gifts to her children from her sisters back home "and I wanted to share them with others." All these ideas went into the making of Mustard Seeds eight years ago. It is open on Sunday mornings to coincide with the school holiday and no fee is charged for joining the club.

Indeed, Mustard Seeds exudes a club-like atmosphere, a meeting place for children of varied ages. "As soon as they walk in, they are members," says Hurley, adding, "It's mostly an informal affair and kids also bring in friends from other areas of the city sometimes. But generally it's the neighborhood children who come in," usually about a dozen.

Book reading or borrowing is not the only activity. The children sit around drawing pictures or trying out jigsaw puzzles. On the walls are displayed their

colorful handiworks: paintings and also pictures of T-shirts they designed and made as part of a contest on Earth Day. "Afterwards we baked a cake, too, sharing it together." Teaching about environment preservation through these little acts, Hurley feels, will plant the seed of sensitive and aware future citizens. Young enthusiasts Riku, Alok, Subhajit and Tiyaasha also show off their self-painted cloth bags, in which they carry their library books home. They also bring out their own newsletter from time to time. Rightly, it carries the message, "Small efforts for big results."

The children also love the way "Maura aunty" gives them a free hand in discovering and experimenting, even allowing them to get wet under a shower after a stiflingly hot day. And why not? While driving down the road, Hurley says her children look out of the car window and wonder aloud why they can't get wet like the street kids. "These are experiences that give simple pleasure to children and I don't think one should be too strict about these things," she says matter-of-factly.

The collection of about 500 books at Mustard Seeds is an eclectic mixture, from beautifully illustrated books by Allen Say like *Tree of Cranes*, Prodepta Das' *Geeta's Day: From Dawn to Dusk in an Indian Village*, to biographies and Harry Potters, of course! Since the idea of Mustard Seeds caught on, Hurley has made it a point to collect as many books as possible while visiting home. She says that attending garage sales is a boon and "public libraries in America also sometimes sell books at rock bottom prices." Hurley also discovered the M-Bag of the postal authorities in America through which one can send a huge number of books and media material at a reasonable rate. Besides, her friends and siblings also continue to send books.

Hurley also works part-time, teaching slum children in an informal school run by a non-governmental organization.

Hurley is also fond of graphic arts. The designer in her finds creative fulfillment through her involvement with an organization that helps poor women earn an income through crafts. Hurley promotes the "pat" (or scroll painting) of the Medinipur district of West Bengal. "What I like about these works is that it is not just

the painting, but the involvement of the whole community. And they can be adapted to modern art very well." She feels it is important to bring into focus the artisans, as well as their work. "For example, a *patachitra* in the Bengal tradition is not complete without the presence of the '*chitrakars*,' the painters, who sing along, describing each scene, which are mostly from the epics." Their singing and unfurling of the scroll make it a whole, she feels.

Hurley's love for Asian folk arts, which was further honed in Japan, is not accidental. She earned her degree from Michigan State University in philosophy and Asian studies and also studied Japanese.

Hurley likes to write, too, and her creativity finds expression in her blog, <http://tik-tiki.blogspot.com/>.

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International Women's Day

The idea for this special day developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries amid rapid industrialization that led to protests over working conditions. Women workers from clothing and textile factories staged one such protest on March 8, 1857, in New York City. They established their first labor union in March, two years later.

More protests followed on March 8 in subsequent years, most notably in 1908 when 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights. In 1975, the United Nations began celebrating March 8 as International Women's Day.

This year's theme is "Ending impunity for violence against women and girls." On March 8, thousands of events are held throughout the world to inspire women and honor their achievements. It is an opportunity to unite, network and mobilize for meaningful change.